

You are walking along the beach, aware of the ebb and flow of the waves, when a shell at your feet catches your eye. Stopping, you stoop down, pick it up, and holding it in the palm of your hand, all else falls away as you become, for one sustained moment, utterly absorbed in the shell’s delicate beauty.

Your gaze is fixed as if some celestial burning took possession of a most familiar form of calcium carbonate, thus hallowing an interval otherwise unremarkable, bestowing largesse, honor, one might say love.

You look up to see the countless shells stretched out before you. You are one with the whole scene of sky, shoreline, birds. Your bare feet burrow into the sand as the waves wash up your legs. Then, looking down, you see once again the shell in your hand, being the one shell that it alone uniquely is in this just-the-way-it-is.

You now walk wary—for it could happen even as you trudge through this season of fatigue—you walk wary of whatever angel may choose to flare suddenly at your elbow. These spasmodic tricks of radiance, the long-awaited descent of illumination, that brief respite from fear.

Bonhoeffer reminds us, “Christ took on *not* an individual human being but rather *human nature*, that is, *all* humanity.” The baby of Bethlehem, born of peasants fleeing autocrats and tyrants, is the one child he alone uniquely is in this just-the-way-he-is and, at the same time, this child of Bethlehem is every child in this just-the-way-she-is. The eternal moment has hallowed every moment.

This should be a rather exhilarating thought—God is present in the glorious and vulnerable flesh of our flesh, bone of our bone. The moment of creation is this moment. Existence is a miracle, and morally considered, a free gift moment to moment. If, by some unthinkable accident, God’s attention slipped, we wouldn’t be here.

It means that within every circumstance, every object, every person, God’s action is going on, a sort of white heat at the center of everything. It means that each one of us is already in a relationship with God before we’ve ever thought about it. It means that every object or person we encounter is in a relationship with God before they’re in a relationship of any kind with us.

“If this doesn’t make us approach the world and other people with reverence and amazement, I don’t know what will” says Rowan Williams. Everything in you must, like the shepherds, like the magi, like the angels, bow down, if not to God, then to “the million-petaled flower of being here” (Philip Larkin), the inconceivable fact of existing at all.

When you consider the radiance,
that it does not withhold itself but pours its abundance
without selection into every nook and cranny not
overhung or hidden;
when you consider the radiance,
that it will look into the guiltiest swervings of the weaving heart
and bear itself upon them, not flinching
into disguise or darkening;
when you consider that sand or shell, snow or shale,
squid or wolf, rose or lichen, each
is accepted into as much light as it will take,
then the heart moves roomier,
and fear lit by the breadth of such radiance
calmly turns to praise.

(A. R. Ammons)

The candle you hold in your hand bears witness to this radiance,
a celestial burning possessing a sea shell,
a long-awaited illumination that makes the heart grow roomier,
a light in the darkness that turns fear to praise.